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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Fine and Applied Arts
in Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

" Did You See That Chair"

By

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Date:

October 18, 1989

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I titled my thesis, "Did You See That Chair?" I committed to further investigate the object, while focusing on how I viewed the chair and the world it exists in. I was concerned with the mystery within the object and the interior space which surrounded it. I dealt with the relationship between the object and its environment. I dealt with the object singularly and as it interacted with other objects. I was concerned with the character of the chair and the connection with figurative elements.

I was excited to read a recent article about other artists who used the chair as subject matter. The article titled, "Implications and Signifiers," by Brian Butler, talks about other artists dealing with an everyday ordinary object, such as the chair, in diverse ways. For example, Tom Leeson's did miniature wood sculptures and used the chair to create a space that implied the presence of the human being. Judy Bethel used parts of chairs and cast paper chairs consisting of branches holding an empty bird's nest. This artist was questioning society's relationship to nature. The author ended the article with this sentence, "Generations of experience impart multiple layers of meaning to even our most taken-for granted objects, and the chair is such an object"¹

Life as I've known it has changed, since the completion of my thesis study. I'm feeling a sense of loss over something I will never have again. I can hold the memories close to my heart, but the feelings are quite different. Even the dreams and hopes I've had have changed. I feel a strange urge and desire to move on while it is hard to let go. Who would have thought that the study of a simple

everyday object would change my life.

Clarity of these feelings has come about while looking for studio space. I've been looking for quite a while and have found myself driving around a lot. This one particular evening I saw streets that were piled with junk. It just happened to be garbage night. I've seen a lot of neat garbage throughout my quest. I began to notice how I reacted to the chairs amongst the garbage. I realized that now I hold a different excitement in my heart towards the chairs. I've developed a kinship towards the chairs because of my extended study of the chairs. The sadness and loss is present because this study has passed and I'm moving forward. I find myself still picking up a few straggling chairs here and there. I'm collecting more chairs now than I did while painting them, but at this time I'm not drawing or painting them.

The point I'm trying to make is, that my thesis study may have come to a closure, but it still continues. I believe that this thesis study will never end and that it will be extended throughout my life. I'll take the memories wherever I go. I've realized that my thesis is a lifelong endeavor which will keep me searching further.

People keep asking me, "Why the chairs?" "Is there some deep meaning to the chairs?" "Did your mom make you sit on chairs a lot as a child?" "I don't understand?"

As well as being a device for growth, the chairs have shown me how I look at life around me and how I react to what I see. The chairs indicated to me how I communicate with other people. Even though the chairs are viewed as objects. I've regarded

them as living beings. This study has brought a life to me that I never knew existed. Even though I feel a sense of loss, I know that I've gained much more and realized that I'm leaving with much more than I could ever hope to depart with. There was a special dialogue between me and the chairs which is unexplainable. What comes to mind, is the film, My Dinner with Andre. In the film Andre is telling his friend Wally about an experience which was unexplainable. Andre was a theater director who had suddenly dropped out of the scene. Andre felt that he was all dried up and had nothing more to give the theater. A friend in Poland convinced Andre to work on an experimental piece with him. Andre was quite dubious at first and later found the experience to be quite valuable. He couldn't explain what had happened and realized later that it didn't matter. The experience and the chance were the important things. Both Andre and I were willing to try something new and found a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

I found it to be very challenging to work with the chairs. How many drawings, paintings and prints could I do while dealing with the same subject matter? Could I sustain my interest and the viewers interest throughout my course of study? I wasn't quite sure, but I'll tell you, I gave it my best shot and was rather pleased with my results.

I came from a formalist background and my paintings tended to be general, unclear and very abstract. The chairs have broadened my horizon quite a bit. I thought that if I didn't complete a painting during my session that it would become overworked. I've

realized since that illusionistic belief that I could work on a painting for a year if I had to and still keep it fresh and alive.

I wanted my paintings to look fresh and alive, so the important issue for me was to keep my ideas fresh and stick with them to the very end. It also became important for me to pull myself away from my work and give myself and the painting some breathing room. The time away became as important as the working time. I began to experiment with reworking older paintings. At one time they felt complete, then I decided to go back to these paintings and either subtract from them or add to them. From this experience I realized that reworking only added to their life and my growth.

I found my paintings to become stronger and much more developed. Of course, I was quite dubious in the beginning. I had a lot of fear of commitment. I believed that once I'd commit to something I would lose my interest, or worse yet, I'd be labeled. These were my biggest fears. Then I realized that people will always label me because of their own ignorance or just so they could try and understand my ideas. Labeling then became a way of identifying the unknown. In a sense my use of the chairs gave the viewers objects to identify with. I wanted the viewer to understand my work. I was more concerned with the communication aspect rather than if the viewer liked or disliked the work.

On a whole I found the viewer to be very receptive to my work. Some viewed the work as being domestic because of the use of fabric along with the chairs. Some saw the humorous qualities of the work and then some saw the chairs as a vehicle for my growth.

The chairs were more than a vehicle for my growth. They became alive and I saw figurative elements in them. I related each chair to characteristics of people. Most of the chairs I picked had distinctive characteristics. For example, most chairs were not totally functional. Some had missing legs, seats, or backs. Some were used until they fell apart. I dug some out of people's back yards. Some chairs were actually in pretty good shape with only minor flaws.

My main interests were in their physical condition and the situation I found them in. I took trips to an antique store in Clyde, NY. This shop had rooms filled with chairs. The rooms usually had wallpaper and paint peeling off the walls. I peeled some wallpaper from these walls and used them in some of my paintings.

In these drabby rooms I found hundreds of chairs just sitting around. Something clicked inside of me. My heart was beating fast and the excitement grew. I began driving up and down streets during garbage days looking for chairs. I had a major chair alert. People would call and leave messages on my answering machine with locations of chairs. I'd see people at school and they'd ask, "Did you see that chair?" My friend Gary would leave chairs in my driveway, steps, porch and studio. I'd wake up in the morning and find a wonderful chair on my front steps. Other artists seemed to get involved and interested in my search. It was great, and I felt that this led to a real community development in the painting studios.

There is nothing like driving around on a beautiful spring day and finding three or four chairs in a grassy area near a curb while the sun is shining and flowers are surrounding the objects.

This reminded me of the famous painting by, George Seurat, "Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte." For some odd reason I would picture this painting in my head everytime I drove past the described scene. It had something to do with the mood. This scene with the chairs felt sentimental and romantic to. It was more like the Impressionists' desire to capture the moment then if I would have tried to use their techniques to depict the situation. I felt a sense of excitement and joy from within because I could still feel and see their intentions, even though I come from a chaotic and fast moving world. It's kind of like stopping and smelling the roses. There was a scene in the movie, The Color Purple, where Ms. Avery was telling Celia that she thought that God really got angry when people would walk past the color purple (re: flowers) and didn't take notice. I believe that God does get angry when we don't acknowledge the beauties around us.

I spent hours, days, weeks and months arranging chairs in my studio, attic basement and porch. I'd arrange them and just sit and look. There was something else about these chairs. Something much deeper than surface whimsical humor. They talked about the serious side of life. This was when I first discovered why I picked broken chairs. The broken chairs reminded me of people. The chairs carried wounds, suffering and pain like we do throughout our lives. I began to notice how I placed the chairs. It was akin to Giacometti's sculpture, "City Square." This sculpture was a city square with seven people walking, none of the people met. They were all passing by in a different direction. There was no

interaction between the people. They were around each other, but very isolated from one another. I was positioning my chairs so they were back to back or if they were looking at each other, it was only a glimpse. Then it dawned on me. They were hiding from each other and were in denial of each others' pain and existence. They all carried wounds and scars with them, but never acknowledged them openly.

I began to look at the materialistic side of our society. We replace our furniture even though it's still in pretty good shape and functional. I started looking at how object oriented our world has become and how people have become like objects. We seem to discard of people in the same way that we discard of our household objects.

I found it very interesting when I first moved to Rochester to see so many objects being discarded. I lived in a small rural town in Texas for four years prior to my move to Rochester. Before Texas, I lived in a small rural town in Colorado. I hardly ever saw functional objects discarded in either place. In a recent trip to Oaxaca, Mexico, I noticed that there were no objects on the sides of the streets. There was absolutely no junk being discarded. Maybe the Mexicans aren't affluent enough to discard of the objects that they have grown tired of. Maybe people in rural areas know how to make use of their tossables. So it could mean that the more affluent you have become the more garbage you have!

My most difficult task was in the actual presentation of my paintings. Each painting was to be presented in a different way. I

used mixed media in every piece. I used acrylic paint, ink, charcoal, conte crayon, fabrics, chair pieces and scraps of canvas. Every painting and print had something collaged on it. The edges of the paintings were very important to me. The traditional stretching method was useless to me. I had to figure a way to present my paintings which would talk about the integrity involved in the actual painting. I tried different avenues and I completely ruled out tacking the paintings to the walls. I felt that this approach may have been too casual and may have turned the viewer away. I tried wrapping the wood with canvas and then attaching the paintings. This method didn't work. I wanted to attach the paintings in the same spirit I had while working on them. The way that I would present the paintings would be a continuation of the painting.

I had to take into consideration the large sizes of the paintings during the presentation phase. I built the stretchers in two and bolted them together in the back. This would make it easier to transport the paintings.

Each painting was to be treated differently during the painting process and the final stage of presentation. You can see that each piece is somewhat three dimensional in appearance because of the building out with the objects.

"Promiscuity Dangling by a Thread," at one time was a floor painting.^A It was actually painted on a dropcloth. I put chairs around the dropcloth and some on the table in front of my window. When the sun came through, shadows would be cast upon the dropcloth. This really intrigued me because of the simplicity and the

strong shapes. I began by drawing the shapes with charcoal and conte crayon. I left it on the floor for a while. After looking at it for a month or so, I decided to cut around the strongest shapes. I then put the drawing on the wall and began to paint. This was a tough painting for me. I worked on it throughout the year. Finally, I decided to attach pieces of an old chair. This became like drawing to me. I worked with the color and line quite a bit from that point on. My final decision was to cut out pieces of luan plywood to the shape of the dropcloth. I wanted both a three dimensional effect as well as the shapes to come away from the wall. I cut the luan in four pieces and attached them to a 1"x3" frame. I attached the painting and was very pleased with the results.

I worked on up to six paintings at a time, so it is difficult to follow the actual progression of each painting. "The Shroud of Promiscuity," was a different painting for me.^B It went through a lot of changes as well as standing still for a long time. It came about while I was applying glue to a chair cut out from another painting. I put this cut out chair on a piece of canvas and applied the glue. The glue followed the edges of the chair and left marks on the canvas. Hours later I began to look at the shapes left behind. I wanted to see more, so I added an ink wash. I got an added dimension from the glue on the canvas. This became the drawing edge of all the shapes. There was something about this painting that talked about something precious and intimate. It reminded me of a shroud. I looked at this painting for a long time. It asked me to pay close attention and to look beyond the surface. It asked me to take my time while working

through. It wasn't like the others because there was no urgency while applying the paint. It had a different pace, and I responded to that pace. I would say that it was in the same flavor as my collage prints. I needed to put this piece on a dark ground to really pull out the shapes. I surrounded the shroud with two shades of blacks. This brought attention to the central shapes. I had a hard time finding the right blacks, so the painting stood still for months. I finally decided to go back to the painting and work with the colors. I glued the shroud to a canvas and added the two black shapes. I liked the effect, but I hated the plasticity of the acrylic paint. After a period of time, I decided to rip the shroud off of this vinyl look canvas. Then I built a stretcher to the shape of the shroud. I painted the sides black and attached that piece to the vinyl look canvas that I tore it from. I then put a stronger black wash over the ink wash and was able to pull out the shapes. I built a stretcher for the background and attached the shroud. It was finished and my job was done.

"Relics Clinging onto a Promiscuous Past," had more of a recessed look.^C The shape was very important and was a strength in the painting. I cut 1/2" foam core to the shape of the canvas and attached it to the stretched dropcloth to achieve the three dimensional effect. I worked with the paint after attaching it to the foam core. There was something missing. I built a platform and put down old oak flooring. I was going to use this as a floor with a rocking chair sitting on it facing the painting. I didn't feel the piece was resolved and I was aware of the space problem in the Bevier Gallery. I then started looking around by studio and found the missing chair which

brought this piece together.

"Promiscuous Promises in the Dark," and "Unblemished Promiscuity," were made up from older paintings, combining old and new ideas together. There were five separate paintings put together to make "Unblemished Promiscuity."^D This painting talked about combining the old and new while dealing with structural elements. The layering of the paintings became important in this piece. "Promiscuous Promises in the Dark," came from an old painting which was reworked.^E I dealt with the paint differently in this painting. The brushstrokes were aggressive and bold. The colors and tones suggested nostalgia. The colors and tones were very rich, dark and mysterious. These were colors I've seen in old houses and buildings. They also reminded me of the brown tones that I've seen on old wooden ships. This is what gave me a feeling of antiquity. I had actual parts of chairs attached to this painting with wire and thread. I decided to apply dots of yellow paint so the viewer could be warned of the protruding objects. This served as an added dimension as well as a warning.

I had three prints along with paintings in the thesis show. I spent a lot of time with printmaking.^{F,G,H} I found a value in the process. Through printmaking I learned how to focus in on my ideas. I learned how to develop light and dark tones, as well as development of color. From this process my depth and dimension became much stronger and my color became much more personal.

During the summer of 1988 I began to experiment more

with the intaglio process. I did a lot of open biting and aquatint on the plate. Through this process I developed a layering effect on my prints. I began to experiment with wiping ink onto the plate and then rolling another color of ink over the wiped ink. This created more depth and gave me a layering effect with the rich tones that I was striving for. I tried wiping darker color onto the plate. I applied a second color which was a brighter color over the dark color. The second color usually had some tone from the first color. I found that the dark color receded and the bright color came forward.

The next step was to bring these prints into my studio. I did that during the fall quarter of 1988. I began to see a relationship between the prints and the paintings. I began working simultaneously from the paintings to the prints. The next obvious step was to start cutting the prints apart and adding other materials to them. I applied wallpaper, fabrics, canvas, paint and ink to the prints. I then build little stretchers with fabric wrapped around the stretchers. I attached them to the print. I wanted the prints to come away from the wall.

If I had more space and time I would have devoted a whole wall to the prints. This wall would have been the family portrait wall. These prints were very precious and reminded me of family portraits.

In retrospective other artist who share my ideas about the object would be Pop artist and Assemblage artist. Richard Artschwager, a furniture manufacture, made an acute observation

about the relationship between man and object. "Pieces of furniture are close to the human scale. This gives furniture in its largest a human quality."²

I believe the object is closely related to human design and also, our values. Their value to us is functional, use, design and familiarity. Another quote by Artschwager that applies to my ideas is, "furniture in its largest sense is an object which celebrates something that people do-or sanctifies it. Celebrate is a better word."³

The Pop artist used the objects of the man-made environment with a sense of meaning in process. The Pop artist played with the typical, on one side, and the evasive and the estranged, on the other. The Pop artist took the everyday object familiar to the viewer, and showed the changes made by the artist. All of the above mentioned are evident in my thesis work. The process was very important to me. I realized recently this summer that I really enjoy taking things apart and putting them together in a different way. Especially, while using everyday objects. I also enjoy the interaction with what might be referred to as action painting with the object and the assemblage process. The chair became a very important part of my process and the development of it.

Robert Rauschenberg used objects unchanged, so that the original function of the hardware were clear within the finished work. He concentrated on interacting the object with photographs, while I chose to interact the object with paint.

While working with the object, I kept it in the state in which I found it. My purpose was to interpret and preserve what I believe to be the objects state of abandonment and existence. In a sense I preferred to view the object as a human with feelings.

The two Pop artists who I feel closely related to are, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. While our ideas may be very different our connection might be process.

Rauschenberg deals with a profusion of objects and events that he can accept within a capacious aesthetic. He deals more with random events. Johns does not take pleasure in connecting random events. I work with the interaction of the object and random events. Johns concentrates on a massive central object, while Rauschenberg deals with clusters of points and keeps you hopping around the image. I play off of both ideas. Rauschenberg used objects from the city dweller and industrial output of material goods and waste. At this time I've limited myself to waste from the city dweller.

From a painters point of view, one of my favorite quotes is by Rauschenberg. "There is no reason, not to consider the world as one gigantic painting."⁴ If this statement that Rauschenberg made in 1961 were true then we can cut into it at random and come up with something that hangs together as art. I can read this as an optimist point of view. Maybe we can change the world and its problems? Duchamp said, "If I call it art, it's art."⁵

As a collage and assemblage artist I deal with piecing together fragments of ideas and objects. It's not always clear to me

of my direction in the beginning, but later on in the process it pieces together like a puzzle. It becomes a different kind of language. It could become very complex, and yet very simple. It borders on the edge of psychological reality and psychological illusion. Guillaume Apollinaire said, “psychologically it is of no importance that this visible image be composed of fragments of spoken language, for the bond between these fragments is no longer the logic of grammar but an ideographic logic culminating in an order of spatial disposition totally opposed to discursive juxtaposition.”⁶

The juxtaposition and fragmentation would talk about the ideas of Cubist painters. Cubism in early years was developed by the influences of Negro sculpture and Cezanne. My use of structure along with overlapping transparent planes and linear forms would be akin to the process of both Picasso and Braque.

In some of my earlier chair paintings I could see a similarity between my work and Picassos. For example, in the *Arlésienne* of 1912 the head is made of flat, overlapping transparent planes, almost rectangular in shape. The profile of the face is superimposed upon a frontal view illustrating the principle of “simultaneity,” the simultaneous presentation of different views of an object in the same picture.⁷ I very often used a frontal position of the chair and had the same chair appear in other parts of the painting while interacting with the main chair.

One of my prints from the thesis show was titled, “A Braque for Bacon.”^F This print came from an earlier painting. It

is handled very much like a Braque. Areas are dissected. I dealt with overlapping planes, a frontal view and profile view of the chair, while concentrating on the structure, form, space, pattern and tone. I used wallpaper in this piece along with an older monoprint I cut apart. The painting of Braques' which comes to mind is, "Café-Bar." He has repeated cut-out overlapping shapes along with patterns, and flat colors. The patterns look very much like wallpaper. Although, the subject matter is not the same as mine, there is a strong distinction of shape and form in each piece, which is similar to my work.

You can see how the viewpoints of the Pop artist, Assemblage artist and Cubist are similar to my concerns. I've realized how important the process of these artists were to my growth and development throughout my thesis study. In reflection, I see how hard work, willingness, involvement, determination, commitment, energy and effort made this a rewarding and challenging experience. I will carry these memories throughout my life and always be thankful for the opportunity. I felt like I gave life to inanimate objects.

Footnotes

1. Brian Butler, "Implications and Signifiers, "Artweek, February 18,1989, pp. 5
2. Lawrence Alloway, American Pop Art, Collier MacMillan Publisher, London, 1974, page 32.
3. Lawrence Alloway, American Pop Art, Collier MacMillan Publisher, London, 1974, page 32.
4. Lawrence Alloway, American Pop Art, Collier MacMillan Publisher, London, 1974, page 55.
5. Lawrence Alloway, American Pop Art, Collier MacMillan Publisher, London, 1974, page 55.
6. William C. Seitz, The Art of Assemblage, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Doubleday and Company, Inc., Garden City, New York, 1961, page 15.
7. Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Cubism and Abstract Art, The Museum of Modern Art, N.Y., 1966, by Arno Press, page 31.

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Giacometti, Alberto, City Square (La Place). Museum of Modern Art, New York (purchase).

Picasso, Pablo, Arlésienne, 1912. Collection Alfred Flechtheim, Paris

Seurat, George, Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte. The Helen Birch Bartlett Memorial Collection. The Art Institute of Chicago.

Index for Photographs of Thesis Work

- A. “Promiscuity Dangling by a Thread.”
- B. “The Shroud of Promiscuity.”
- C. “Relics Clinging onto a Promiscuous Past.”
- D. “Promiscuous Promises in the Dark.”
- E. “Unblemished Promiscuity.”
- F. “A Braque for Bacon.”
- G. “Granddaddy.”
- H. “Chair with a Promiscuous Future.”















